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The Sinking Star;

Or, Frank Reade, Jr.'s Trip Into Space With His
New Air-Ship "Saturn."

By "NONAME."



HURLED INTO SPACE.

Suddenly a bright flash of light came crashing down against the bow of the air-ship. In that instant it seemed as if the end had come. The Saturn seemed to turn and plunge downward. The dynamos buzzed and the rotascopes whirled. But the propeller no longer worked.

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THE SINKING STAR;

OR,

Frank Reade, Jr.'s Trip Into Space With His New Air-Ship "Saturn."

By "NONAME,"

Author of "Six Days Under Havana Harbor," "The Land of Dunes," "The Sacred Sea," "The Circuit of Cancer," "In the Tundras," "The Silver Sea," etc., etc.

CHAPTER I.

A WONDERFUL PROJECT.

PROFESSOR ASTEMAS SEEFOR, of the Great National Observatory, famous scientist and the king of astronomers, adjusted the lens of the big telescope for the sixth time, and gazed long and wonderingly into the mirror below. There the starry firmament was pictured.

"That is queer!" he muttered.

For some while he gazed into the mirror; then he made a swift measurement on the mirror's surface.

"Sinking at the rate of one degree per week," he declared. "If this keeps on, in less than a year Virno will have disappeared into ulterior space so far as to be invisible by any means of observation from the earth."

Again and again he satisfied himself that this was a fact.

Virno was truly a sinking star. Some strange force had thrown it from its orbit and hurled it with frightful force into space. This alone could explain the phenomenon.

An idea occurred to Seefor.

He began computing the orbit of Virno and its present path of declension. He made a startling discovery.

This was that it was sure to fall across the orbit of Jugo, the famous star discovered by the German scientist Schellier and also that at the crossing point, allowing that Virno's present speed neither increased or decreased there would surely be a collision.

This collision would be something beyond conception.

The crashing together of two planets in invisible space might present only the aspect of a blazing meteor as viewed from the earth. But if witnessed from any point beyond the limit of terrestrial atmosphere would be a sublime spectacle.

Part of the orbit of Jugo was in invisible space, it being one of the principal "disappearing" stars so-called. When upon that part of its orbit nearest the earth, it was visible through the lens of a good telescope. But when upon its furthest orbit it was wholly invisible.

And straight down upon Jugo the sinking star was descending. With this mighty discovery Seefor became greatly excited.

Day by day he hung over the telescope mirror watching the descent of Virno. He studied the scientific journals to learn if possible if any other astronomer was also aware of the phenomenon.

He was delighted when he found that no mention was made of it.

It seemed certain that he was the only discoverer. He resolved not to make the discovery known.

Whole nights he spent at the telescope studying the wonderful sinking star. A powerful desire was upon him to witness the spectacle of the two stars meeting in space.

Strange thoughts were given birth in his brain.

What of this planet so strangely hurled from its orbit in space? Were there beings upon it as upon the earth?

What a dreadful fate then was theirs! What a terrible ending had come to them!

Such some day might be the fate of earth. Whirling, tumbling into space, what must be the awful sensation?

It made him sick and dizzy. His brain whirled, and his eyes grew blood-shot. Insomnia held him in its hideous grip.

"Mercy, mercy, oh, great Ruler of all the universe!" he moaned. "Thou Maker of all these worlds, thou Master of all these unending wonders! How puny the brain of man, how witless his counting before Thy matchless power!"

The scope was beyond him. His brain could not comprehend it all. For the human being is a limited creature.

Limited in sight, in sense, in all forms of being. Permitted to exist but for a brief atom of time, to fill but a tiny void, of what slight consequence he becomes individually and comparatively. Yet in his infinitesimal sphere he is the most wonderful of God's creations.

Seefor grew pale and wan and thin. He was unable to sleep nights, and walked the observatory floor unceasingly.

To him the desire to witness the crashing of the two worlds became a desire which nothing could displace.

He studied the telescope mirror constantly, and computed the speed of Virno hourly to make sure that he would not fail to witness the wonderful spectacle.

But yet he knew that he would be disappointed.

There would be but a brief flash visible to him at best, even though the most powerful lens were used and the night was favorable. As time passed on he reflected dismally upon the preponderance of chances against his seeing it all.

The almanacs predicted storms at that season. The meteorological signs indicated cloudy skies. The astronomer's heart grew cold.

It seemed to him as if there could be no greater disappointment.

"I must witness that catastrophe," he declared, grimly. "In some manner I must see it even at the cost of my life."

Indeed, he had almost begun to admit that a life would be not altogether ignobly sacrificed in the attempt to witness the destruction of two worlds, either of which was probably as large as the earth.

He knew that to make sure of witnessing the great catastrophe it would be necessary to get beyond the limit of the terrestrial atmosphere, which acted as a film upon the telescope lens.

Through clear space the planets could not help but show more plainly, and the dangers of obscuring clouds would be at once removed.

At once Seefor began considering the possibility of making an observation from such a vantage point.

He could think of no other means than a balloon.

This would be an uncertain and precarious method, though if successful it would be most advantageous.

The highest mountain in the world was in a latitude from which the collision could not well be seen. The altitude, however, could not altogether overcome the obscurity of the atmosphere, and would by no means dispose of the possibility of veiling clouds.

In this quandary, Seefor's meditations were interrupted by the entrance of a brother servant.

Professor Cyril Ventura was a Portuguese astronomer, noted the

world over as the man who had accurately computed the orbit of Rahbel's Comet, which appears once in every twelve years.

"Buenos, friend Seefor!" he said, cheerily, removing his velvet skull cap. "I hope I find you successful to-day!"

Seefor looked up moodily.

"Success comes to those who wait," he replied.

"And you——"

"Am waiting!"

Ventura went to the telescope mirror and studied it. Seefor gave a start and watched him intently.

Had he also observed the sinking star? Did he also know that Virno had been hurled from its orbit?

Presently Ventura turned carelessly away.

"Virno's comet is now a week late," he cried with a laugh.

"Another false prophet. Ah, well, it is easy to err in the computation of orbits."

Seefor drew a deep breath.

"Very true," he agreed. "But the orbit of stars is sometimes even more difficult."

Ventura looked at him sharply.

"Have you found a new planet?" he asked, abruptly. "I am your friend, Seefor. Do not be afraid to trust me. I would rob you of no credit."

Seefor seemed to hesitate a moment, then a powerful resolution seized him.

"Enough!" he cried, impulsively, springing up. "I mean to take you into my confidence, Cyril. I know you are my friend."

The two astronomers stood face to face.

"Good!" he said. "Out with it."

Seefor led his friend to the mirror.

"Look here!" he said, placing a finger upon the specified constellation. "You know every star there."

"Every star in that constellation—yes!"

"Then you can locate Virno?"

"Virno! Why, certainly! A planet of the twelfth magnitude—hereabouts—oh, this is strange."

Then the Portuguese turned a blank face toward Seefor.

"This is strange," he repeated. "Virno is gone!"

Seefor smiled.

"Look twelve degrees further down," he said. "What do you see?"

Ventura followed the line of stars and studied the sky a while thoughtfully. Then he seized the calipers and made a measurement.

It was several moments before he concluded his task. He grew grave and interested.

Seefor reclined upon a divan in the corner of the observatory and watched his friend through half-closed eyes. Ventura finally returned to a fresh study of the constellation.

It was a full hour before the Portuguese astronomer turned from his work. Then he was excited and his eyes shone like stars.

"Soul of Aristotle!" he exclaimed, gazing searchingly at Seefor. "This is one of the greatest discoveries of these later years. The honor is yours!"

Seefor bowed gently.

"Thank you!" he said. "I am glad you have seen the importance of this discovery. It is no light matter that a world should fall into space and destroy another world."

"It is a mighty thing to ponder upon," agreed Ventura, "and only verifies the possibility of our planets doing the same thing some day."

"The old time prophets have always decreed the ultimate end of this earth. There is no doubt but that they knew more about it than most of us are inclined to give them credit for."

"Our planet, however, will not travel so far into ulterior space as Virno is doing."

"Very true. From the best calculations of gravitating forces, I think we would fall into the Sun. Let that day be far distant."

"Amen! but now in what manner shall we take advantage of this discovery? If you wish my aid, I will gladly cast my lot with yours."

"I accept your kind offer."

The two astronomers gripped hands warmly, and the compact was made.

CHAPTER II.

THE RESCUE.

BUT the great problem was not yet mastered by any means. Seefor, however, felt much reinforced and looked more cheerfully into the future.

Both knew the importance of quick action.

The sinking star was going into space at the rate of one degree per day. The elapse of time until it would collide with Jugo would not be great.

How were they to secure a certain or positive vantage point from which to witness the great crash? This was the absorbing question.

Ventura was greatly in favor of a balloon.

But Seefor said:

"We have no certain means of navigating a balloon. Suppose we

get into space and it collapses? Again it may drift too far from the desired vantage point of observation."

"The best point of observation, I believe, will be from a certain point near the center of the State of Tennessee."

"Just so!"

"We can reckon the air currents and their approximate velocity, so that we should reach the border of space somewhere in that vicinity."

"Possibly!"

Thus the two savants reckoned their chances with rare skill. Finally, they decided upon the balloon ascension.

"We may lose our lives!" said Ventura. "But certainly we could sacrifice them in no better cause."

"You are right!"

The next thing in order was to employ an aeronaut.

This was not an easy matter. However, a daring fellow was finally found who agreed to undertake the task.

He owned a monster balloon, which was finely equipped. His name was Pierre Lachaise, and he was a Frenchman.

In due time all was ready and the ascent was made.

The La Bello Mario, with its distinguished passengers, sprang skyward, and soon as viewed from the earth was but a speck in the zenith.

Up and up went the sky voyagers. Clouds lay beneath them, and the earth was hidden from view.

So rare and cold was the atmosphere, that the travelers were obliged to wear a peculiar kind of nose cover, which was the invention of Professor Ventura, and protected the lungs from collapsing with the pressure and lack of oxygen.

The balloon drifted in the thinnest of air, and could not be forced higher. All that was hoped for now was that it would remain thus suspended a necessary length of time for the observation of the collision of planets.

But in spite of all efforts, it finally began to sink.

Moreover, a strange nebulae was in the way of the telescope, and the two stars could not be plainly seen.

This was most disheartening for the two astronomers. Several days passed thus.

By their calculation the time for the collision was imminent. They waxed extremely nervous.

But now, to crown their misfortunes, an unexpected and most frightful incident took place.

The effect of the rarefied air upon the human system was strangely unpleasant. It seemed to affect the brain as well as the lungs.

Both Ventura and Seefor had noted that Lachaise had of late been acting very strange.

He seemed uneasy and talked in a wild, rambling sort of manner. This seemed to worry Ventura particularly.

"I tell you there is something wrong with the Frenchman!" he declared. "I fear that he will go mad!"

"Pshaw!" declared Seefor. "That will be only temporary, and will pass away. I think we need fear nothing."

"I hope that you are right."

"I feel that I am!"

Thus the matter was allowed to drop. But the fifth day of their residence above the clouds the climax came.

The balloon had been losing altitude steadily but surely for several days past.

Lachaise had just finished eating his lunch when the two astronomers were startled to see him start up with wild staring eyes. Wild words burst from his lips, and he started for the upper platform of the balloon.

Before either astronomer could make a move to prevent, he had swung himself up into the rigging and clutched the valve rope of the balloon.

With a wild shriek, he began to climb up it. The result can easily be imagined.

The valve burst open, and gas, rushing forth, the balloon began to fall.

Moreover, the rope itself, being slender, was tremendously taxed by the weight of the mad aeronaut. Then came the awful catastrophe.

Lachaise, with a wild shriek of laughter, swung himself out clear of the balloon on the slender rope.

There was a crashing, rending sound, and the balloon tilted a moment. The next instant down into space shot the unhappy man—down to an awful death!

The balloon, lightened for a moment, shot upward.

Then it stopped and began to sink rapidly as the gas escaped in torrents.

"Great Cicero!" shrieked Ventura. "We are lost, Seefor!"

Appalled and anguished, the two scientists stood looking at each other. This was certainly a calamity altogether unexpected.

Dashed to earth were all their hopes, their cherished plans. Before they could hope to recoup their shattered fortunes, the time would be past. It would be too late.

Forgotten was everything else in that appalling realization. The bitter disappointment set aside all else.

Down towards the earth they were settling.

Seefor rushed to the edge of the basket and looked over. He gave a hopeless cry.

"It is all up with us!"

Indeed, so it seemed. Far below were the waves of the tossing sea. Lachaise had fallen into this and would never more be seen.

The balloon was descending into the ocean also, so it would seem that the two astronomers would go to the same fate.

But at the last moment a strange sound, like distant shouting with the report of a gun, was heard.

The two astronomers, astounded, looked in all directions. The horizon was clear; no ship was in sight.

What did it mean?

Again the sounds came to them, and this time much nearer. Then Ventura unwittingly glanced upward.

As he did so a great shout burst from his lips:

"Seefor—am I dreaming? Look! What has come to pass?"

The American astronomer looked in the direction indicated by his colleague, and also gave a great cry.

"An air ship!" he gasped.

Such it was, floating in the atmosphere above them. A craft unlike any they had ever seen.

Dumfounded, the two astronomers gazed at it. The problem of aerial navigation was solved.

But who were the aerial navigators, and of what nationality? This was the question.

Down the big air ship settled toward them. A voice came from its deck now easily distinguishable:

"Ahoj, the balloon! Do you want help?"

"Ay, ay!" replied Seefor; "that we do, and right quick!"

The balloon was now not more than half a mile from the surface of the sea, and fast settling. There was no time to lose.

Down from the air ship's deck came tumbling a long rope ladder. It swung down close to the air ship's side, and hung parallel with the big gas globe.

Pretty quick it began to swing, and soon came within reach of Ventura. He seized it and allowed Seefor to climb up the rungs before him.

Then he followed, and they swung out in mid-air. Seefor had secured the biggest telescope on his back, and Ventura carried other astronomical instruments in a big bag slung over his shoulders.

Then the aerial voyagers on the air ship began to draw the ladder up. Soon the two astronomers were right under the keel of the air ship.

Then they went over the rail, and were drawn safely onto the deck. They stood face to face with their rescuers.

There were three in number. One was seen to be a tall, finely formed and handsome young man. The second was a negro, black as a coal, and the third a comical red-haired Irishman.

The young man bowed politely and said:

"You are in bad luck, gentlemen."

"That we are, sir," replied Seefor. "It was owing to a sad misfortune that befell one of our party."

Then the astronomers told their story. The young captain listened with deep interest.

"Your friend is beyond help," he said. "I fear you will never see him again."

"Poor Lachaise," said Seefor. "We have given him up."

"It is a sad misfortune."

Then the young captain told his story.

Frank Reade, Jr., was his name, and he hailed from Readestown, U. S. A.

He was an inventor of many wonderful things, and had large machine shops in his native town for the manufacture of these. His fame was world wide.

The two men, the negro and the Irishman, were his faithful servants, and had accompanied him upon all his travels. Pomp, the negro, and Barney, the Irishman, were much devoted to Frank Reade, Jr.

The air ship was a wonderful structure. It proved its inventor a man of great genius.

It was in shape not unlike a racing yacht, with long ram like bow. The hull was of thin aluminium and wood, yet bullet proof.

Buoyancy was of course the principal thing considered. This had been attained in a remarkable degree.

Light but powerful electric machinery drove at great speed the three huge rotascopes, which furnished the power of elevation. A huge four-bladed propeller at the stern both guided and propelled the air ship.

A search-light was placed upon the pilot-house forward. The cabins were richly furnished, and the air ship was equipped for a year's cruise in the air.

CHAPTER III.

ON BOARD THE AIR SHIP.

On the air ship's pilot-house was the name Saturn.

She had left Readestown but a few days before on an aimless expedition or trial trip. It was by the merest chance that she had happened upon the balloon navigators.

Also it was a fortunate thing for the latter that she had done so. Their lives were thus preserved.

Frank Reade, Jr., listened with the deepest interest to the account given by the astronomers of the proposed trip into space to witness the collision of the two planets.

"And this means the abandonment of your project?" he asked.

"Yes," replied Seefor, dejectedly.

"Is it too late?"

"By no means, were we once more in our balloon. Only for the idiocy of Lachaise we should have been all right," said Ventura.

"What would you think," asked the young inventor, slowly, "of taking a trip into space with this air ship?"

Astounded beyond measure, the two astronomers stared at Frank. They could hardly believe their senses.

"Can we offer any inducement for you to do so?" asked Ventura, eagerly.

"We should consider the enterprise an assured success," declared Seefor.

"Then the matter is settled," declared Frank. "I will undertake to carry you nearer the planets than any balloon could possibly do!"

The two savants stared, and Frank said:

"Come into the cabin, and we will make all the plans."

The two astronomers, like men in a dream, complied.

Sitting at the cabin table, they laid before Frank the entire programme as originally arranged. Then Ventura said:

"But I fear we ascended as high in the balloon as it is possible to do and avoid loss of life."

"Pshaw!" said the young inventor, with a laugh. "We shall go several thousand miles nearer."

For a moment the two savants were aghast.

They looked at each other and then at the young inventor.

In that moment it seemed to them that he was the victim of the same strange aberration which had destroyed poor Lachaise. Their hearts sank.

But Frank, who seemed to divine their thoughts, laughed:

"Don't fear!" he said. "I can demonstrate to you the feasibility of the plan very easily."

As he spoke he arose and opened the door of a small cabinet. Within it was a curious looking tank and what looked like a chemical retort.

"Here is a chemical generator," he declared, "which can furnish oxygen for the entire boat. No matter how rare the air is outside, the doors and windows may be hermetically sealed and we can travel as far into space as you desire without any danger of suffocation. This generator carries the pure air to every part of the ship by means of tubes and valves."

The two scientists listened with interest and surprise. Then Ventura said, earnestly:

"Really, Mr. Reade, you are the genius of this age. There is no known invention yet to excel this."

"That is right!" agreed Seefor. "We place ourselves in your hands, and are agreed that nothing short of a divine Providence has set you our way!"

"Pshaw!" said Frank, lightly. "I shall enjoy it as much as you. Here is to good fortune and a pleasant voyage."

"Hurrah!" cried the scientists.

No time was wasted. Frank stepped into the pilot-house and pressed a valve, which sent the air ship flying skyward.

Up, up she went like a rocket. The day had waned and night was beginning to reign in the sky.

Below lay fleecy banks of clouds beyond which was the earth. Above shone the planets now made larger by the rarefaction of the atmosphere.

The voyagers were at once confined to the cabin, for life could not be sustained outside.

Barney, the Irishman, presided at the wheel, while Pomp, the negro, was singing plantation songs in the cooking galley.

A jolly pair they were, and the most stanch of friends, though abnormally fond of playing "roots" on each other. In this they were generally "even up."

Pomp had just finished cooking some toothsome crullers, and ventured into the pilot-house with a couple of them in his hands for Barney.

"Don't yez be afther comin' in here wid my ny yer Dutch cookin'," cried the Celt. "Shure, it's too greasy fer the loikes ny an Irishman."

"If yo' don't want it, chille, den yo' kin do de nex' bes' flug."

"P'wat is that?"

"Make yo' own doughnuts."

"Shure, I cud make a doughnut av that fnce av yours nisher. But I'll thry wan av thin fer luck. Av they choke me, shures it's yeas' as will be n sorry unygnr."

Pomp grinned.

"Mehbe yo' flnk dey will," he said. "Praps yo' jes' spih' fo' n hot time."

"It's me opinion that I'd have to look a mighty soight further fer that," smiled Barney.

"Huh! Ah ain't so sure. I've run up ngn de game several times in mah life, honey!"

"Yez wud be up agin the hardest yez iver thried," declared Barney, swallowing the rest of the doughnut.

"Ah don't kno' 'bout dat!"

"Do yez want convincin'?" asked the Celt, rolling up his sleeves.

"I've jes' achin' fo' it, honey!"

"Thin there's wan fer yez!"

Barney squared away and gave the coon a bill. It struck against his skull with a sound like a battering ram against the board fence.

The coon never noticed the crack nor tried to get back at the Celt. He only shook his head like an angry bull and roared:

"Huh! yo' an' de only pebble on de beach. Dere's odders, chile, an' I go one ob dem. Jen along joesy dere, an' look out fo' yo' self." With this Pomp lowered his head and made a dash at Barney. The latter tried to dodge.

But the coon caught him in the diaphragm, and the way Barney turned a back somersault was a caution to monkeys.

"Whurroo!" he gasped, as he rolled up onto his feet; "yez are potrin' but a black cinder, and ivery wan knows it!"

"Don' yo' sass me, chile!"

"There's another fer yez!"

Barney made another lightning crack at the coon. The result was that they closed in a terrific wrestle.

All around the pilot-house they rolled, tugging and panting like a couple of fat porpoises, until finally they desisted from sheer exhaustion.

Meanwhile, the air ship had been bounding upward into space at a lively rate.

It was now, however, in such rarefied altitudes that there was little resistance offered the rotascope blades by the air, for very little air was there.

The aspect was now a wonderful one. The earth lay below beyond masses of clouds, impenetrable to the eye.

Overhead was the great limitless expanse, star-studded and immense. The planets were now the size of moons, and the moon itself was an enormous mass of conglomerate.

The two astronomers were now in the height of their desires. They spent all their time in the observation windows with their telescopes.

They could see the sinking star of Virno and compute to a certainty the orbit of Jugo. What had been to them while on the earth half guesswork, was now plain, undisguised fact.

Virno yet seemed quite a safe distance from Jugo, and the expected collision was therefore yet a good ways off.

As they realized this the two astronomers were not a little disappointed.

All was in readiness for the observation, and the conditions were favorable. But the planets were not yet amenable.

There was nothing to do but wait for the right moment to come. So the voyagers made themselves comfortable.

With the coming of the day the earth was seen.

It was simply a hazy tinted sphere which seemed to hang gigantically over them and threaten them with its frowning proximity.

Little could be identified upon its surface. A peculiar haze, probably the density of atmosphere, precluded this.

"All of which explains why we are unable to see large objects on the moon," declared Seefor. "That the moon has an atmosphere, it is safe to admit, but it is exceedingly thin."

"There remains much to be learned yet regarding the Heavenly bodies!" declared Ventura. "I trust we may learn much on this trip."

"It will be of value, if we return alive!"

"That it will!"

Thus they discussed matters and consulted the ascension gänge. They discovered that the air ship had gone as high into space as was possible, unless other means were employed.

At this juncture Frank Reade, Jr., came out of an inner cabin.

He carried in his arms long coils of wire and a peculiar trumpet-shaped instrument.

"Heigho!" cried Seefor. "What have you there, Friend Reade?"

"A new invention," replied Frank quietly.

"A new invention? Indeed, what may it be?"

The young inventor deposited the instrument and wires on the cabin floor. Then he said:

"If this proves a success it will be the greatest discovery of modern times."

The others were interested.

"That is a remarkable statement," declared Ventura.

"But a true one!"

"It will add honor to your already grand achievements," said Seefor.

Frank unwound the wires and connected them with the instrument. When this was completed he said:

"I don't mind telling you the purpose of this invention."

"We are glad to hear it," replied Seefor.

"Indeed, yes!" said Ventura.

The young inventor then said:

"I trust you will not be startled with the announcement. This instrument I call an attractomotor, and with it I hope to gain affinity with distant magnetic points, which those planets may be. This will enable me to fix the Saturn in space by means of magnetic poles, creating an axis akin to that of any drifting body in space, such as the Earth, for one. It is possible that these magnetic poles may be employed for the safe travel through space of the air-ship to any distant planet upon which a magnetic line of attraction can be made."

CHAPTER IV.

THE FLIGHT OF METEORS.

It was certainly a most astounding declaration which Frank Reade, Jr., made.

The two astronomers listened to it with sheer surprise. For a time they were overcome with the force of the thing.

Yet its possibility was patent to them, and increased their interest.

"Great Cicero!" gasped Seefor; "what will come next? Why think of the possibility of a safe trip by means of negative and positive poles to some distant planet and back? The thing seems incredible."

"It may be impossible," declared Frank, "but that is to be determined. I mean to make the experiment."

"And if it succeeds?"

"We may find ourselves on Mars or Jupiter in a very short time. Travel would be swift. Distance is nothing in space."

"Wonderful!" ejaculated both scientists. "You are a genius sir!"

"Nothing of the kind!" declared Frank, with a laugh. "It is an easy and simple hypothesis, that is all. I only avail myself of a few of the wonderful and hidden forces of electricity."

From that moment the two astronomers were deeply interested in Frank's experiment.

They even almost forgot the sinking star and its attendant phenomena.

Frank carefully rigged the attractomotor. It was nothing more than a curious dynamo-magnet, with strong sympathetic discs, much on the principle of the submarine telegraphy, used by ships at sea, without the use of wires.

By means of its affinity with any distant magnetic pole could be established, much as the needle of the compass is attracted to the magnetic poles on earth.

This wonderful invention of Frank Reade, Jr.'s, was the peer of all others.

It was almost beyond conception in its wonderful workings. Most astonishing results were obtained.

It was attached to the upper part of the pilot-house. The connections were made with the dynamos and the magnetic discs charged.

Instantly the head of the air ship came about with a jerk.

A large planet just above Virno had furnished the responsive pole. The discs emitted sparks, and there was a perceptible motion of the Saturn.

"It is a success!" cried Frank Reade, Jr., in triumph. "We have found a distant magnetic pole. The power of attraction is so great that we are being drawn toward it."

It was an astounding revelation.

Then Ventura leaned forward and clutched the daring young inventor's sleeve.

"How is it?" he asked, in a thrilling voice. "Can we ever return?"

"With the greatest of ease," replied Frank.

"Explain it."

"You will understand," said Frank, "that I am using now only the positive pole of attraction. By reversing the current the negative pole repels the planet, and we are forced back toward the earth until within its forces of gravitation. There is no risk. We may go on as far as we choose. It is only a question of time to reach one of the planets. That, I fear, we will not live long enough to do!"

It was a tremendous realization.

They were now traveling quite rapidly toward the planet, it was true. The ascension gänge showed this.

But yet the distance was so frightful that, as Frank declared, it would require a lifetime to get there and back. It was wholly unfeasible to think of reaching the planet.

But the attractomotor enabled them to get vastly nearer to it, and to a point from whence a good view could be had of the extinction of Virno and Jugo.

Yet the success of the trip depended wholly upon escaping any possible calamity which might befall the air ship.

Should anything break in the machinery, or should the rotascopes fail to revolve, there would be no immediate danger of falling, for the attractomotor would still hold the Saturn firmly suspended. But it would preclude any attempt to get back to the earth.

For the moment the air ship got into the line of terrestrial gravitation it would fall upon the earth with frightful force and be sure death to the voyagers.

All this Frank explained to the two astronomers. The matter was now clear to all.

"Let us hope that nothing will befall the air ship!" cried Seefor.

"We have had reverses enough thus far on this trip. May success now attend us."

"Amen!" exclaimed Ventura. "I feel that it will."

"I have complete confidence in the Saturn," declared Frank. "I think she will pull us through. Still, of course, accidents are apt to happen."

The view of Virno was now fine.

The astronomers were constantly studying the sinking star with their glasses. Jugo was rapidly nearing the point of collision in its orbit.

Grand beyond conception would be the display when the two planets should meet. It seemed as if the whole universe must feel the shock.

Yet those on the earth so far away would doubtless never realize it, and few would see more than the meteor flash. That would be all.

Thus time went on.

Frank had gone as far into space with the attractomotor as he cared to. The two poles were established, and the air ship remained stationary.

There was nothing to do now but to wait for the extinction of the two planets. Then they could decide upon a return to the earth.

In the interim, things were never dull on board the air ship. Frank Reade, Jr., was ever on hand, cheerful and light. Barney and Pomp were, as usual, full of jovial fun. They sang, and played on the fiddle and the banjo.

But matters were not destined to long pursue this even tenor. One day a thrilling incident occurred. Barney was polishing the pilot house window when there was a blinding flash of light, a roar like a thousand thunders and the air ship whirled about like a top and seemed to be literally going to pieces.

"Great Scott!" cried Frank, trying to gain the pilot-house. "What has happened, Barney?"

"May the devil take me if I know, sor!" cried the Celt. "Shure, I niver was so skeered in all me life!"

It was some while before any on board could recover from the strange shock. Then Professor Ventura, who had been at the observation window, vouchsafed an explanation.

"It was a small meteor," he declared. "I first caught sight of it coming down upon us at a right angle. I was sure that it was going to strike us, but before I could give a word of warning it had passed."

"A narrow escape!" cried Frank. "If it had struck us, it would have settled our fate forever."

"You are right," agreed Seefor, who was very pale. "I hope we shall dodge the next one as easily as this."

The words had barely left his lips when a distant roar was heard, and the ship rocked violently.

Another meteor passed the Saturn some half mile away, which was plainly seen by all.

The next instant another flashed by at a greater distance. Almost every second one now passed, which was clear evidence that they were viewing a shower of meteors.

The risk which they were incurring was enough to turn each member of the party gray.

But fortune was with them, and none of the falling aerolites came so near as the first, which most have grazed the air ship.

The meteoric display lasted fully twenty minutes. It was a relief to the aerial voyagers when it was over.

But now a startling fact was revealed. Professor Ventura took a look at the ascension gauge.

"By Cierco!" he exclaimed; "what has happened, Mr. Reade?"

"Eh?" ejaculated Frank.

"We are falling!"

"Falling?"

"Yes, we are ten miles nearer the earth than we were before that meteor missed us by a hair's breadth."

Frank saw that this was true! He could hardly believe it.

He at once examined the machinery. It was all right. But when he looked at the attractomotor he found one of the wires grounded. This had diverted the current and weakened the instrument. It is needless to say that the insulator was quickly replaced.

The air ship once more became steady, and in a short while the distance was recovered.

But now the two astronomers made a surprising discovery.

This was that their calculations as to the time for the meeting of Virno and Jugo were wrong.

It would yet be a week before the sinking star should cross the orbit of Jugo. This was a long and tedious wait.

But the aerial voyagers were determined to make the best of it. It was not ordained, however, that they were to remain much longer in their present position.

The change came in a most startling manner.

A jay slipped by rapidly after the first meteoric shower. Then a second display of aerolites burst upon them.

They were seen at some distance, and were observed to be approaching at such a rapid rate that Frank Reade, Jr., became intensely nervous.

It seemed incredible that the air-ship should pass through a second shower unharmed. This fall of aerolites was more dense than the other.

A hasty consultation was held.

And it was decided imperatively necessary to at once descend into safer regions. Frank lost no time in making action.

He reversed the magnetic current in the attractomotor. Instantly the air ship began to recede toward the earth.

But the danger was by no means averted.

The shower of aerolites rapidly drew nearer, and threatened the air ship's safety.

CHAPTER V.

BACK TO EARTH.

Frank saw in an instant that the descent of the air ship into space was not swift enough for the aerolites. They were gaining rapidly.

"Heaven help us!" he groined. "If they overtake us we are lost!"

"There is no help for it," cried Seefor. "We must make up our minds to return at least part way to the earth."

"I trust it is not too late," cried Ventura. "The cloud of aerolites is fast drawing this way."

"That is enough," cried Frank. "We shall be lucky to escape with our necks."

But the downward progress of the air ship was necessarily slow. Its speed depended upon the negative current of the attractomotor.

It had not yet come within the influence of the earth's gravity, so that there was no attraction whatever in that direction.

Had the Saturn been released from the power of the attractomotor, it would simply have drifted away into space to remain until brought within the attracting power of some other body, perhaps the earth itself.

The aerolites had been hurled into space by some powerful force which gave them the speed they possessed. It was not their own weight which impelled them.

This was all known to the voyagers, and they knew that all depended upon getting out of the path of the cloud of aerolites as soon as possible.

Down went the air ship with its suspense-stricken voyagers. But the cloud of meteors grew thicker and still continued to draw nearer.

Suddenly a bright flash of light came crashing down against the bow of the air ship. In that instant it seemed as if the end had come.

The Saturn seemed to turn and plunge downward. The dynamos buzzed and the rotascopes whirled. But the propeller no longer worked.

That the air ship had been struck by a fragment of a meteor was certain. It was a miracle that it had not been destroyed.

Shouts of alarm went up from Barney and Pomp. But Frank cried out in a calm voice:

"All steady! The danger is past. We shall escape yet!"

And his words were prophetic. They did escape, but the air ship was now within the earth's atmosphere.

It was falling rapidly and now the fleecy clouds seen below proved that they were going earthward. Frank turned the rotascope lever and checked the descent to a degree.

But he could not entirely arrest the downward descent of the air ship. At once a startling discovery dawned upon him.

The crashing of the meteor against the air ship's bow had disarranged the rotascope connections so that they no longer ran at a necessary speed to keep the air ship up.

It was bound to descend to the earth. There was no other alternative but to allow it to do so.

Frank communicated this fact to his companions.

"That will be all right if we do not land in the sea," declared Seefor.

"We have yet time to make a return trip from the earth to see the meeting of the planets."

Down into the clouds now settled the air ship.

A few moments later the earth was seen far below. The voyagers drew a breath of relief.

It was not water which lay below them.

A mighty wilderness of trackless forests, high mountains and valleys was revealed.

What part of the earth it was they could not even guess. But one thing was certain.

It was not a tropical clime.

The vegetation was that peculiar to a temperate zone. Seefor ventured the opinion that it was some part of British Columbia.

And after events proved that he was right.

The shower of aerolites had long since gone from sight.

The air ship now approached the earth more slowly. As the air became denser, the rotascope blades became more powerful and sustaining.

It was seen that they were to alight upon a bald rock-crowned eminence. This was good fortune.

To fall among the trees of the forest would be exceedingly unfortunate as well as dangerous.

Frank did all in his power to ease the descent of the air ship. There was very little shock as it touched the ledge.

Barney threw out the anchors and all descended from the deck. In spite of all, it was a genuine pleasure to set foot on the firm earth once more.

The hour was near dusk and night must soon settle down over the world. It was lonely and dreary enough in the heart of this vast wilderness, which must be far from civilization.

Impenetrable forests extended in all directions. Not a sign of living habitation was anywhere visible.

As near as could be guessed, they were in a part of British Columbia. But Seefor said:

"For that matter it might be a part of Northern Asia. The scenery there is very much like this."

"We will soon know," said Frank. "As soon as day comes again I will take an observation and get our bearings."

Little could be done that night. They took a brief trip about the eminence, and then went back aboard the air-ship.

The night came on clear and star-lit.

Virno could not be identified, for the telescopes were not powerful enough. But in her direction there were frequent flashes of falling meteors.

"It is a very good thing that we did not stay there," declared Ventura. "If we had we would have no doubt come to grief."

"One thing sure," said Seefor, "when this shower of meteors is

over it will likely make it much safer for us to return. We shall be less likely to encounter another."

"You are right," agreed Frank. "And now our plan must be to repair the electric connections and the damage to the air-ship as quickly as possible."

At once Barney and Pomp were instructed to begin work on the repairs just as soon as daylight should come. Then as all were very weary it was decided to retire.

Barney was on watch for the first half of the night and was to be relieved by Pomp. The Celt was in a somewhat shaky condition.

He was like all Celts, of a superstitious turn, and the woods to him were full of hobgoblins and fairies.

He intimated as much to Pomp, which at once put that astute coon to thinking.

"Huh!" muttered the coon. "Dat am jes' mah chance. I'se jes' a big fool if I don't see it."

At once he laid his plans. When the coon went below to turn in he did not disrobe, or even attempt to court the gentle goddess of slumber.

He had a hard score against the Colt, and he believed that he saw now an opportunity to pay it up.

After a while all became quiet aboard the air ship. Frank Reade, Jr., and the two astronomers were sound asleep. Barney paced the deck above. Pomp made sure that all was safe, then he crept out of his bunk.

It did not take him long to perfect his plans. He went into the galley and smeared his black features with flour. Then he went to the chemical room and procured some phosphorus, which was luminous in the dark.

This he smeared over his eyes and across his cheeks. This gave him the appearance of a veritable fiend.

A white sheet was next in order. Thus equipped the coon was ready for business or fun, it mattered little which. He dropped out of the cabin window and slid over the rail in the shadows.

Barney paced the deck with leisurely step. He glanced at times into the gloom of the forest.

It must not be imagined that the Celt was a coward.

He was far from this so far as things mundane went. It was only that which partook of the spirit world which at all troubled him.

Pomp was crouching in the shadows just beyond a shrub not more than fifty paces from the air ship. He was chuckling with delight at the thought of the practical joke he might play on his friend.

Barney advanced finally to the very bow of the air ship. This was directly in a line with the bush behind which Pomp crouched.

This was the coon's opportunity.

He instantly arose and began executing a can-can with a screeching accompaniment.

Barney's red hair stood on end. His knees trembled and his teeth chattered like castanets.

"Howly smoke!" he gasped. "It's the ould devil himself. Shure an' he's come fer me an' devil a bit do I loike it. Bad cess to him! Mither preserve us!"

Then all the saints in the calendar rolled volubly from Barney's lips. He crossed himself with great earnestness and repeated an invocation against his Satanic Majesty.

Pomp was careful not to overdo the trick.

He remained in view but a few seconds. Then he vanished as quickly as he had appeared.

This was a mighty relief to Barney, who fancied that his prayers had driven the apparition away. This gave the Celt a species of false courage.

He ran to the rail and shook his list violently.

"Arrah, an' it's a murderin' coward yez are, afther all, an' it's a not Barney O'Shea yez will be afther takin' away this toime to be shure. May the plague bound yez forever! Bad cess to yez!"

But these last words froze on his lips.

From behind the bush the apparition appeared on all fours, snarling and hissing like an infuriated beast. Again Barney became the victim of mortal terror.

"Avant will yez!" he yelled. "Whisht away! St. Pether defend us! Mither Frank! Help, help!"

But just as Pomp was about to again vanish from sight an unlooked-for turning of tables occurred.

The practical joker became the victim of his own joke in a most unexpected and thrilling manner.

CHAPTER VI.

THE HUNTING TRIP.

As Pomp retreated once more before Barney's invectives there suddenly arose from behind the bush a gigantic black form, and a pair of mighty arms encircled him.

He felt a hairy face pressed against his, and a hot, fetid breath nearly suffocated him.

"Golly fo' glory!" he gasped. "I'se a gone coon! Massy Lordy! Help dis chile! Help! help!"

His agonized cry went up on the night air. He knew that he was in deadly peril.

It was a monster bear from the depths of the forest which had sprung out upon him. He was a chile in the grasp of the brute.

But fortunately the beast seemed to be satisfied with merely bug-gling him, and did not attempt to bite him. It was, however, a critical moment for Pomp.

"Help! help!" he yelled. "Dis chile am gwine to be killed."

"Howly mither!" muttered Barney; "the devils are fightin' out there, bad cess to them! Shure, I hope they'll have a merry toime av it!"

"Help! Help!" wailed Pomp. "Why don't yo' cum to help me, Barney? I'se Pomp, an' dere am a big bear got hold ob me. Come quick or he eat dis chile up!"

Barney danced a jig on the air ship's deck.

"No, yez don't!" he cried. "Shure, I'm onto yez game ivery toime, ould boy. Yez niver will entice Barney O'Shea out there to pull him to pieces. May St. Michael fly away wid yez!"

"Fo' de lan's sake, fish, why dnu' yo' cum?" cried Pomp. "Call Marse Frank—quick! Dis big bear eat me up."

"Whurrool! May yez be hanged be the horns av yez fool Barney O'Shea!" retorted the Celt. "It's safe I am, for St. Michael is me patron, an' he kin bound yez af' an' all yer imps."

Pomp wailed and shrieked. The bear hugged him tighter, and occasionally thrust his wet muzzle into the alighted coon's face.

Such an uproar, however, could not fail to awake Frank and his two companions in the cabin. The young inventor sprang out of his bunk.

Seefer was already up.

"What on earth is all the racket?" asked the astronomer, in amazement.

"That is what puzzles me," replied Frank. "I think I shall endeavor to find out."

With this he threw on a coat and rushed out on deck.

He saw Barney dancing on the forward deck like a veritable devil.

"What is all this uproar?" cried Frank, rushing up to the spot.

The Celt turned and cried:

"Shure, sor, it's the devil, sor, come for me this noight an' he's afther thryin' to entice me out there, which I'm not such a fool as to do, sor."

Frank frowned angrily.

"What are you talking about?" he asked, sharply. "What nonsense is this?"

At this moment Pomp sent up another wailing cry for help.

"Why, it is Pomp, and he is in trouble!" cried Frank. Then turning to the Celt:

"Why don't you go to his aid? Are you a coward?"

"Shure, sor, it's no man I'm afraid of!" protested Barney; "but it's the devil himself out there—"

"Stop!"

"Shure, I saw him wid me own eyes, sor, hoofs an' horns an' all."

"None of that!" cried Frank, angrily. "Give me a weapon and come along. Hold on Pomp! We are coming."

"Glory sakes, sah! I'se done glad ob dat! Come along quick af' dis b'ar takes a notion fo' to bite mah haid off."

By this time Seefer and Ventura were both on deck. Frank turned the search-light's glare full upon the spot where Pomp was held in the bear's embrace.

A white figure was seen struggling with the bear. This was enough for Barney.

He fell upon his knees, wailing:

"Howly mither, it is the devil, shure, Mither Frank, an' don't yez be afther goin' out there at all, sor, or yez will be sorry for it."

"Fool!" gritted Frank, rushing toward the struggling figures.

The bear now did a very singular thing. Instead of using his jaw to disable Pomp, he hurled the coon from him and started to meet Frank.

The young inventor halted, and raising his rifle fired once, twice, thrice, as fast as the repeater would work. Every bullet told.

The huge brute went down in a heap.

It was a close call for Pomp. The coon came forward sheepishly the next moment, devoid of his sheet and with much of the flour rubbed from his face.

"Well, Pomp," said Frank, sternly, "what are you doing out here? Have you been sleepwalking?"

The coon hung his head and made an inaudible reply. Barney, by this time, had embraced the situation.

He grinned largely at Pomp's plight, but he was unable to say a word, for the coon had really deceived him, although he had experienced such hard luck and exposure ultimately.

Seefer and Ventura, however, laughed heartily over the affair, and the latter said:

"You can see what comes of a practical joke. Very bad practice friends, very bad practice."

There was no more sleep that night for any on board.

But morning was not far distant, and it was decided to sit up the rest of the night, anyway. Frank's attention had been arrested by a curious spectacle.

Far to the northward in the blackness of the night there burned a strange star of light.

"The camp of some wandering hunters," declared the young inventor after a while. "These wilds could be tied by no others."

"That doubtless explains it," agreed Seefor. "I certainly hope it does not mean the proximity of foes."

"What foes could we expect to find hereabouts?" asked Ventura.

"Indians!" replied Frank.

"Are there any tribes in the Northwest at the present day hostile to white men?" asked Seefor.

"Their hostility would depend upon circumstances," replied Frank. "If they thought they could safely descend upon a small party of white men in these wilds where the crime would likely never be known, I believe they would do it."

"Of what tribe might they be?"

"Either Assiniboine or Blackfeet."

This put the astronomers to thinking. They watched the distant light until the coming of day paled it.

Work was at once begun on the machinery. But as only Frank and Barney could work upon it, the others were left idle.

This was by no means pleasant to Ventura or Seefor.

After some while they grew very uneasy. The latter said:

"Ventura, I'll go you a hunting trip. We ought to find a line buck in these forests."

"I believe you!" agreed Seefor. "I'll go if you wish!"

"Golly!" ejaculated Pomp. "Wha', won't you take me along, too?"

"If Mr. Reade is willing, we will do so!"

"I am quite willing," declared Frank, "and I wish you the best of luck."

Preparations were soon made.

Armed and equipped, the three hunters left the air ship and struck into the forest. The two astronomers were no novices in the art of hunting.

And Pomp was a dead shot with the rifle.

He had spent several seasons with Frank Reade, Jr., on the plains, and knew just how to bag deer or big game.

Deep into the forest they plunged.

A wilder or more impenetrable wood they had never seen. There was plenty of evidence of game.

They came to a purling stream with mossy banks. Here were deep pools in which myriads of trout swam.

Everywhere Nature was lavish. The vegetation was of the densest sort.

It was not long before the hunters had a chance to exert their skill. Pomp started a deer from his cover.

Seefor, with an excellent shot, brought the lovely creature down. Then the tracks of a bear were found.

Thus the hunters went on for an extended period of time.

The sun was long past the noon hour when they came to the base of a high eminence.

The top of this was devoid of trees, and Seefor suggested that they climb it, to see if they might not get a view of the air-ship.

So they proceeded to toil up the ascent slowly. It was not easy work to push their way through the tangled undergrowth.

But finally the ledge was reached. They stood upon the highest point and gazed about.

Great stretches of forest were all about. But far away to the southward they could see the eminence upon which rested the air-ship.

"Great Cicero!" exclaimed Seefor, "I had no idea that we had traveled so far. We had better begin to think about making a return."

"You are right," agreed Ventura. "And it is no slight distance, either. Hello! what is that?"

All eyes were turned in the direction indicated by the Portuguese astronomer.

And they were given a great start at the sight which met their gaze.

A tall flag-pole rose above the trees, not over half a mile distant, where there seemed to be a clearing.

Upon this pole was a flag, which, if it had been seen upon the high seas, would have been understood. But in this strange part of the world it was a puzzle.

The flag was black as ink, and adorned with skull and cross-bones.

There it flanneted in a grim and hostile fashion. The hunters gazed at it with startling eyeballs.

"Great Aristotles!" gasped Ventura. "What do you make of that, jends?"

"Golly! It done looks to me like a pirate," ejaculated Pomp.

"A backwoods pirate!" exclaimed Seefor. "Who ever heard of skull and cross bones in the backwoods?"

"I have an idea," said Ventura, grimly, "that it means something serious for us if we do not get out of here at once."

"Be more explicit, please!" said Seefor, bluntly.

Others are road agents and outlaws. No doubt we have located one of their camps."

Smoke was seen curling up from among the trees about the flag pole. This was sure evidence of the presence of human beings there.

While aware of the risk of their position, our adventurers were nevertheless the victims of a keen desire to take a look at the backwoods camp.

Of course this would be attended with no end of risk.

But after discussing its possibility Pomp declared:

"I tote yo' win' to do. Yo' jis' wait yere an' dis chile creep up dere unbeknownst an' jis' take a look at dem people. Den I cum back an' tote yo' all about it."

The two astronomers laughed.

"The trouble with your plan, Pomp, is that we are just as curious to see them as you are."

"Jes' so," agreed the coon. "Den I wait yere fo' yo' to go an' take a look at dem, if yo' says so."

"You are sufficiently accommodating," declared Ventura. "But I don't think we will do that. I think it will be just as safe for all of us to go. We can use the most extreme of care. If the worst comes, we will depend upon the air ship to come to our aid."

"A'right, sah," agreed Pomp; "I'se ready to agree to wha'ebber yo' gentlemen say."

"Then it is all settled," said Seefor. "Let us make the attempt."

With this, they slid down the ledge and re-entered the forest.

They had fixed the point of the compass on the flag pole, so that they would be sure not to miss it.

This done, they crept cautiously through the undergrowth toward the outlaw camp.

But a few hundred yards further on they came to a path, and near it a bubbling spring of water. They were not far from the camp.

Very wisely they avoided the path and kept in the edge of the undergrowth. It was well that they took this precaution, as an incident proved.

The distant sound of a man's voice raised in rollicking song was heard. Very soon he came into view in the path.

He carried a couple of water pails. He was a type of man much out of the ordinary.

He was of powerful frame, with abnormal breadth of shoulders. His features were flattened and wolfish in their cast. Unkempt hair and beard made his looks almost beastly.

He was dressed in buckskin, with a cap made of beaverskin with several hawk feathers stuck in it.

In his belt were stuck a couple of revolvers and a knife. He had the appearance entirely of a "bad citizen."

That there were more of his ilk in the vicinity our adventurers felt sure. They knew that it would be a serious matter to rouse this hornet's nest.

So they crouched in hiding until the fellow had passed.

Assured that the coast was once more clear, they now went on. But with greater caution.

Soon the trees grew thin, and then the distant murmur of voices was heard. A few moments later, and they were given a complete view of the outlaws' camp.

It was a strange and motley scene.

Several cabins of bark and brush were built among the trees. A camp-fire blazed before their doors, and about this a score of the toughest types of men possible lounged.

They were wood-hawks of the most pronounced type. Cut-throats to the core and ready for any deed of crime on the calendar.

Our adventurers crouched in the underbrush and watched the scene.

Some were smoking, others were singing or talking, and a number were throwing bowie knives at a mark.

"Ugh!" whispered Ventura. "I should not care to fall into their clutches."

"Right!" agreed Seefor. "Our necks would stand a stretching. Those fellows will kill for the love of killing."

"Golly!" whispered Pomp; "I done wish Marse Frank was heah now wid de air ship. We jes' wd show dem a flag or two."

For some while our adventurers watched the outlaw camp. Then they decided to get out of such a dangerous neighborhood as quickly as possible.

The day was drawing to a close, and there was great need of haste, if they would get back to the air ship before darkness should settle down.

It took a long time and much cautious work to get back to the base of the eminence which they had left but a short while before.

But they succeeded finally, and then a course was set straight for the air ship.

They felt safe enough now, for in the likelihood of meeting one of the outlaws in the forest, they had the odds in their favor, and no alarm could bring the whole gang down upon them at once.

Rapidly they strode through the forest, and in due time reached the spot where they had killed their first deer.

But little of the venison could be taken, as it was necessary to make all haste back to the air ship. They pushed on, and had the satisfaction of knowing that barely a mile was before them when darkness began to shut down.

But at this juncture Seefor suddenly halted.

"Listen!" he declared. "I believe I hear the sound of fire-arms!"

"Fire-arms!" exclaimed Ventura. "What can it mean?"

They exchanged glances.

"Only one thing!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE OUTLAWS.

"I will," agreed Ventura. "No doubt you have heard of the wess gangs of woodmen which frequent the woods and hills of British Columbia. Some are counterfeiters of the most adroit type.

"A battle?"

"Yes!"

The thought that the air ship had been discovered and attacked by the outlaws was in the minds of both. It gave them a chill.

They knew that it was not yet sufficiently repaired to enable a flight to be made. But still it would be a difficult matter for the outlaws to capture it, despite the fact that only two men were in defense of it.

In any event it behooved the hunting party to hasten to the scene as quickly as possible. This they did.

On they plunged through the undergrowth. A regular fusillade of rifle shots was heard.

It was evident that a lively fight was in progress.

Nearer drew the sounds, and then the flash of the powder could be seen in the gloom. This guided the three hunters, and they made a detour so as to approach the air ship from the other side.

Once Pomp came near stumbling upon one of the foe, but by the best of chance, the outlaw mistook him for one of his own gang and paid no heed to him.

The adventurers reached the other side of the air ship just in time.

It was evident that the outlaws were being reinforced, and that they were deploying to completely surround the air ship.

The search-light swept the ledges from time to time to guard against a surprise. And this very fact made the position of our hunters a dangerous one.

For in approaching the air ship they might be mistaken for foes by Frank and Barney.

On the other hand, they would surely be seen by the outlaws, which would be about as bad.

In face of these perils, it behooved them to work with caution.

But Pomp now showed his strategy.

"Hole yo' whin!" he cried, eagerly; "yo' gemmens stay right yere, an' dis chile wo'k his way up like a snake on his belly to de air ship. Dat fishman, he know mah call, an' he am bound to let me abolt. Dere I kin 'plain to dem, an' de rest will be easy."

"Can you do this with any assurance of success, Pomp?" asked Seefor, anxiously.

"Suah, sah! Yo' jes' see!"

"All right, then. We will wait here until you come back."

Pomp at once started for the air ship. Up the face of the ledge in the narrow crevices he worked his way.

It was a daring feat.

If seen, he knew he would be shot by either friend or foe. But he thought not of the peril. He knew that something had got to be done.

And success crowned his efforts.

When right under the air ship's rail he gave the call which Barney knew. The Celt heard it.

"Be jahers, Misther Frank!" cried Barney, excitedly. "Shure, there's the naygur callin' to me from outside."

"Then they have returned," cried Frank, joyfully. "Answer him, Barney. It will be a ticklish task to get them all safely aboard again."

"Shure it will, sor. But if yez say the word it shall be done!"

"It must be done," declared Frank. "Answer him."

Barney did this.

The code of signals passed between the two friends. Then Pomp crawled over the rail in the shadows and was quickly on board.

He explained matters very quickly.

The result was that the search-light was not turned to that side of the air ship, and in the shadows the two astronomers crept up and came aboard.

It was a time for mutual congratulations and much joy. To a certain extent the foe had been outwitted.

But yet there was danger. The utmost of care must be used.

The outlaws were daring, desperate men. They were also cut-throats, and once aboard, might murder the air ship's crew to a man.

"It is our business to keep them off," declared Frank, grimly.

"An' that we'll do, sor!" said Barney.

But at this moment the outlaws suddenly ceased firing. There came a lull in the battle.

"What's up?" asked Ventura. "Have they got sick of the attempt?"

"Don't you believe it," said Frank. "Ah, I see what the trouble is!"

At this moment out into the glare of the search-light stepped a man bearing a white flag.

"A flag of truce," cried Ventura.

"A parley!" said Frank, coolly. "Well, we'll see what they have to say!"

With this the young inventor stepped out upon the air ship's deck to meet the truce bearer.

"Hello, strangers!" he shouted. "I want to talk with yew."

"Proceed," said Frank, coolly. "What have you to say?"

"Wall, I'm one of the Brotherhood of the Black Flag, an' all this 'ere region is our stamping ground. Who the devil are yew, an' what do yew want hyar? That's what we want to know."

"Very good!" replied Frank. "I can tell you at once. We are aerial navigators, and an accident to our air ship brought us down here. As soon as we have repaired our air ship we shall fly away and not trouble you more."

"Ha! that's the way of it, eh?" replied the outlaw. "Wall, we'd like to take a look at your air ship. Mebbe you'll receive a visit from five or six of us."

"I don't believe I will."

"Eh?"

"The honor is respectfully declined."

"Sho, now! that's the way you want to make friends, eh? They ain't very hospitable people whar yew cum from."

"It depends upon whom we care to entertain."

"See here, now," cried the ruffian, angrily. "Yew don't know who you're talkin' to, do yew?"

"I think I do."

"Wall, then, yew should talk more civil or yew may have to pay for it. We are the high cards in this little principality, and yew can bet we are!"

"I don't care who you are or what you are," retorted Frank. "You fired upon us and received us in a hostile manner. I don't propose to trust you in any way, and we don't want anything to do with you. The best thing you can do is to go about your business and let us strictly alone."

"Then you ain't goin' to allow us to make a friendly visit?"

"No, sir."

"That settles it. We'll make you all eat humble pie afore we're through, an' you kin bet we will."

With this the outlaw turned and vanished in the woods! A moment later the bullets were again rattling like hail against the steel shell of the air-ship.

But no harm was done.

Our voyagers returned the fire simply to keep the foe at bay. And thus a couple of hours wore away.

At the expiration of this time the outlaws ceased firing. There came a lull, and for a time it seemed as if they had withdrawn.

Seefor vouchsafed an opinion to this effect, but Frank rejected it.

"Don't you believe it," he declared. "It means mischief of some kind. The best thing we can do is to keep on our guard."

And the young inventor was right. Suddenly, from the forest, there arose a dull roar.

A score of human voices were swelling in one hoarse yell. Then out of the shadows they came like panthers to the attack.

It was a headlong charge, and was made with all the desperation of a hardened gang of ruffians careless of their lives.

On they came like furies. But their red flannel shirts made excellent targets for the defenders of the air ship.

The repeating rifles were worked with deadly effect. The red line grew thin and wavered.

Half way over the ledges it broke and fell back. It was a signal repulse, and a victory for the defenders of the Saturn.

This settled the conflict.

The outlaws came not again to the attack. Fully one-third of their number lay dead on the ledge.

It was not long before day. Light appeared in the east. Then several of the gang came under cover of a flag of truce and carried away their dead.

One of the outlaws who seemed to be the leader, ventured to open a parley again with Frank.

"You are too strong for us," he declared. "We shan't trouble you any more."

"You would have done well to have let us alone in the first place," replied the young inventor.

"You've whipped us fair and square. I reckon ye're fair-minded men."

"We always do what we agree," replied Frank.

"So I judged. Then I want to ask a favor of ye. Bein's we've stood the lickin', ye oughter be generous enough to grant it."

"What is it?" asked the young inventor, cautiously.

"Mebbe you take us fer counterfeiters, or road agents, an' think we're jes' up here hidin' from the law."

"I take you for a bad lot."

"That's all right."

"Am I far wrong?"

"Wall, we ain't so terrible bad, I kin tell ye. When we make an agreement we'll stick by it—leastwise, I will, an' my word's law with this gang."

"What are you driving at?" asked Frank, impatiently.

"Jest this! You've licked us fair an' square; we'll own it. Now, that oughter be enuf without peachin' on us. You understand?"

Frank saw the point.

"I understand," he said.

"Wall, is it a squar deal?"

"I would advise you to quit these regions and turn over a new leaf. It is impossible to tell just what I may do about it."

"Then yew won't agree?"

"No, sir!"

"Hum! Is money any object? We ain't got much, but then——"

CHAPTER VIII.

ONCE MORE IN SPACE.

THE truce bearer approached until within easy speaking distance.

Then he hailed the air ship.

"No, sir!" replied Frank, bluntly. "Money is no object whatever. My advice to you is to go back to civilization——"

"They'd hang me."

"Well, I am sorry for you, but these are the best terms I can offer!"

A volley of oaths rolled from the outlaw's lips. He retreated very angrily to the forest.

All that day Frank and Barney worked on the machinery.

Pomp and the two astronomers were contented to stay aboard the air ship. They did not venture upon another hunting trip.

Near nightfall Frank came up from below wearily, and said:

"We are all right once more. There are some bad dents in the bow of the ship, but they can do us great harm. We can go back to space!"

"We shall have just time to get there before the planets meet," declared Ventura. "May we be spared another flight of meteors?"

"I certainly trust that we may have better luck," said Frank. "And it may be that we shall."

"I believe it," said Seefor confidently. "We have met with many reverses, and it is now time to earn some success!"

Barney went out with Pomp and got in the anchor. All was now in readiness for the ascent.

It was decided not necessary to ascend to so great a height. The attractomotor, moreover, was so damaged that it could hardly be employed again.

Up shot the air ship in the twilight. The sun had been below the horizon, but now in the upper air it again fell aslant the air ship's deck.

The earth was dark long before night came to the altitudes in which they now were. Up and up sped the Saturn.

Once more frost formed on the windows and the steel work.

The air became so thin that the voyagers were compelled to retire to the cabin and employ the generator.

Again the planets became to them the size of moons, and Virno and Jugo were seen to be perilous near each other.

Up went the air-ship until it could go no further without the aid of the attractomotor.

Then it was allowed to drift in space while the astronomers placed their big telescope in position and prepared for the observation.

It was an exciting time for them.

They were constantly at the telescope. The two planets seemed to be drawing rapidly nearer.

At any moment the collision might occur.

Thus all were on the qui vive when an astounding thing happened. The two astronomers were at the telescope, and even Frank and Barney and Pomp were watching the planets when a human voice plainly smote against the frosted glass of the observation window.

The tone and every word was distinct.

"Oh, God help us! We are lost! We shall not make the observation, for death awaits us!"

Astonished, all of the voyagers looked at each other.

"Did you speak?" asked Seefor of his colleague.

"No; it was you."

"Not I."

"Perhaps it was Mr. Reade?"

"No, sir!" replied Frank, emphatically; and Barney and Pomp pleaded not guilty.

What did it mean?

Were they in spirit land? Was it a voice from some intangible wanderer in space?

For a moment all were astonished. Then Frank divined the truth. "I have it!" he cried. "We are not the only voyagers in space."

Amazed, the two astronomers exclaimed:

"But that voice sounded right against the glass."

"That is easily explained. Sound travels miles through space with the greatest of ease. You will find that there are others besides us trying to make an observation of the phenomena of Virno."

It was to the astronomers a startling realization. They could hardly believe it. But Seefor said:

"Where are they, then?"

"They may be miles from here!" declared Frank.

"By what means have they reached this altitude?"

"A specially constructed balloon might come up this far. I can think of no other air ship in existence."

"A balloon!" ejaculated Seefor.

At this moment a great cry came from Barney, who had been at the pilot-house window.

"Shure, Misther Frank," he cried. "Wind yez come here at wanst, gor!"

Frank sprang to his side, and saw at once what had excited the Celt's attention.

Below the air ship, fully a mile, he saw a balloon. It was rocking and swaying violently, and seemed in dire distress.

Frank took one look at it, and saw that if action was made at all, it must be instant.

So he cried:

"Quick, Barney! Let the Saturn go down as fast as you can. We shall do well to save those aeromants."

CHAPTER IX.

THE BALLOONISTS.

THE light of the moon and the stars was all that there was to depend upon.

Yet the balloon, even at the distance of a mile, could be plainly seen, a peculiar condition of affairs in space.

Frank saw in an instant that the aeromants were in deadly peril. There was no doubt but that they would fall to the earth if something was not done at once to aid them.

He would have been less than human to refuse them aid.

Down shot the air-ship.

Every instant it gained on the slowly sinking balloon, from which the gas seemed to be leaking.

It does not take long for a heavy body like the air-ship to fall a mile. It quickly overtook the balloon.

In the car were two men dressed in furs. They were not quite high enough to be affected by the rarified air, so far as breathing went.

But one of them, for all that, seemed in dire trouble. He hung limply over the edge of the car, and his companion was ministering to him.

Frank now was able to open the pilot-house window as the altitude admitted of it. He did so, and at once shouted:

"Hello, the balloon!"

Astonished beyond measure the two aeromants glanced upward. A great cry escaped their lips.

"An air-ship!" cried one.

"We are saved!"

"May Heaven be praised!"

"Are you in trouble?" asked Frank.

"That we are. Our balloon is collapsing, and my friend here is suffering from dreadful hemorrhages."

"Keep up good heart," cried Frank. "We will save you!"

"Who are you?"

"I am Frank Reade, Jr."

"Ah, I have heard of you and your air-ship. Have you not two astronomers aboard named Seefor and Ventura?"

"We have!" replied Frank.

"Bless my soul!" exclaimed Ventura. "That is Watts, of the National Academy of Science. And that looks like Professor Morse with him."

"They had courage to venture up here in a balloon!" cried Seefor.

"You forget! Did we not do the same thing?"

"You are right."

"Whoever they are," said Frank, "they will probably enjoy the same privilege of looking at the extinction of Virno as we will, for I intend to take them aboard, and there is not time to take them to the earth."

"That is all right!" cried Ventura. "We will not begrudge them the honor."

"No, indeed!" said Seefor. "Have them come aboard."

By this time the air ship was even with the car of the balloon. The latter had now begun to fall rapidly.

It did not take long to throw out a rope, which was seized by Watts. He fastened it about Morse, who was ill.

"Draw him aboard first!" he cried. "It will lighten the balloon."

This was true enough.

As Morse swung clear of the basket the balloon lightened greatly. The sick scientist was soon aboard.

A rope was thrown Watts next.

The rescue was none too soon.

Suddenly there was a sharp report and the great gas globe burst. Down it went like a rocket.

Had the aeromants been aboard then they would certainly have gone to a fearful fate.

But they were safe aboard the air ship. The crew of the Saturn was augmented by two.

Morse was taken into the cabin and quickly revived in the oxygenated air. He was soon himself again.

The scientists quickly affiliated, and Watts and Morse told their story.

They had also discovered the sinking star and the reckoning they made was the same as that made by Seefor.

They were equally as desirous of viewing the extinction of Virno and had considered its possibility. Learning that Ventura and Seefor had departed with a balloon they also decided to adopt the same plan.

They had secured a balloon, but were unable to procure an aeromant. In lieu of this they decided to go without one.

The result the reader now knows. Morse had entered with painful lung hemorrhages, owing to the rarified condition of the atmosphere.

So when the Saturn again sprang into space, the scientists were four in number. Quite sufficient for the needs.

Again the doors and windows closed, and the aerial voyagers confined themselves to the cabin.

Up they went until once more the rotascopes were made to take them higher.

Then Professor Seefor made another observation, and gave forth the thrilling statement:

"The planet Virno is approaching the orbit of Jugo at a frightful rate. The collision should occur within an hour."

It was an exciting moment.

All kept their glasses glued upon the distant planets. They could be seen now almost merged into one.

Suddenly, each seemed magnified into a tremendous outburst of flame with fearful scintillations.

For a large circle about them the air seemed full of flying aerolites. There was a distant faint rumbling and a distinct perceptible shock.

The air ship quivered for a few moments, but this was all.

The distant display lasted for a full two minutes. Then it ceased, though in various parts of the blue canopy contiguous there were shooting stars and aerolites by the score.

Virno and Jugo, as planets, had ceased to exist.

The voyagers on the air ship had beheld one of the most wonderful spectacles ever viewed by man.

But it was over, and, so far as the earth was concerned, no harm had been done.

But not one in the party but drew a deep breath, and much the same thoughts were in the mind of each.

What had really ceased to exist with the destruction of these two planets?

Did it mean the ending of two mighty human worlds like the earth, and had billions of lives been launched into eternity, as would be the case should the earth leave its axis?

This was a problem which was never to be solved.

All that could be deduced from it was conjecture at the best. Not for all time would it ever be known.

But one thing was certain.

Two mighty planets of the solar system had in that moment been wiped out of existence, or blown to atoms as it were.

These atoms were traveling in all directions through space, and would continue to travel for all time, unless they should come within the attracting power of some planet like the earth and fall upon it.

The chance for this was good, and there was no doubt but that some small particles of Virno or Jugo might in time fall upon the earth.

Could they have been identified, our friends would have regarded them as most desirable souvenirs.

But this was hardly to be expected. One aerolite is hard to be identified from another as to its origin.

But who could say what human hopes and projects—what tender lives and loving or sorrowing hearts had been obliterated in that awful instant? Only the all-seeing God knew of this.

"May Heaven help the poor souls on those planets," declared Seefor.

"If such found existence," said Ventura.

"Who shall say they did not?"

"On the other hand who shall say they did?" asked Professor Watts. "That is a matter beyond human ken. We must satisfy ourselves with the knowledge that two worlds have just come to an end!"

"And we have been fortunate enough to see them!"

"Just so!"

Several fine photos of the affair had been secured. Then Seefor drew his pencil through the orbits of Virno and Jugo upon his astronomical chart.

They had ceased to exist.

The great object of the aerial journey had been attained. All were much satisfied.

And now naturally enough all began to think of home. There seemed no other phenomena of interest at hand.

The sinking star had vanished beyond the horizon of eternity. It would attract the attention of the astronomers no more.

"Well, gentlemen!" cried Frank Reade, Jr. "Are you ready to go home?"

"We are!" chorused the astronomers.

Then Watts exclaimed:

"But where is Morse? What has become of him?"

All looked around instinctively. The eccentric scientist had vanished some little time previous. It was asserted that he had been seen to enter the cabin.

Morse had acted very queerly of late. The experience which he had in the balloon had had a singular effect upon him.

The lung hemorrhages had weakened him. But there seemed no reason why they should affect his mind.

And yet he had behaved very erratically. Things which were regarded as serious by the others would excite the most extreme of levity.

"Ah, he's all right," Ventura would say. "Some men are always lumpy in high altitudes. You'll find him all right when we return to the earth."

"I hope so!" declared Watts. "I have not been a little worried about him. Morse is a good fellow, and I should much dislike to see anything happen to him."

"I don't think you need fear that," Frank Reade, Jr., asserted.

"He will be all right when he gets back to earth."

This had been the state of affairs up to the extinction of Virno. During the display of the planets he had been very grave and apparently interested.

But just as soon as the affair was over he had vanished.

For the moment this was noticed.

In the consequent excitement it was forgotten, and nobody again

thought of it until an hour later, when Frank chanced to enter the cabin forward.

He approached the table to pick up a chart book.

But as he was about to put his hand on it he saw a letter lying on the table. At once he picked it up and glanced at the address.

Thus it read:

"To my friends on board the air ship Saturn. A message of farewell."

CHAPTER X.

THE INDIANS.

For a moment Frank stared at the inscription with sheer amazement and not a little thrill of horror and anticipation.

He knew almost before he opened the epistle what it contained.

But he opened it and read it. Then he sent up a loud cry:

"All hands in the main cabin to hear bad news!"

Those in the after cabin at once came rushing forward. It was a moment of suspense.

The young inventor stood white-faced and trembling by the table. He held the letter in his hand.

"Friends," he said with forced calmness, "I have bad news!"

A moaning cry burst from the lips of Professor Watts, and he started forward.

"Let us hear it!" he cried. "Do not defer it."

"I will do so," replied Frank. "Give me your attention."

Then he read as follows:

"DEAR FRIENDS AND FELLOW VOYAGERS:—I am sorrow that I am compelled to leave you so soon. But Jove has sent me an invitation by Zephyr, one of his warriors, to pay him a visit, and then return to the earth by another route.

"I have no fears as to my safety. I have been assured by Jove that if I step boldly out into space his invisible Zephyr will be there to transport me instantly to his kingdom; so you will find me there, if you care to come, else I will see you on the earth later.

"What a marvelous contribution to science we have furnished. Only think of our mighty discoveries! And now I am to visit the domains of the immortal Jove and Pluto, and all the others. When I get back to the earth I shall write a great book.

"So, dear friends, I shall bid you good-by and God speed. May you return safely to your homes. With all my regards, I sign myself,

"JAMES MORSE, A. B. A. M., F. A. S.

"Astronomer and Stargazer."

For some moments after the reading of this astounding but explanatory epistle there was a dull silence.

Finally Seefor drew a deep breath and said:

"Poor Morse! That is a sad end. If we had only suspected!"

"I knew he was aberrated," declared Ventura. "But I did not think it bad enough for that."

"Nor I," groaned Watts.

However, nothing could be done. The professor was beyond aid.

It was hardly likely that he would fall so many miles to the earth and be found anything but a mass of pulp.

"God rest his soul," said Barney, reverently.

"Dat am right, chile," declared Pomp, sadly. "He was a berry nice gemman."

"We will see if his body can be found," declared Frank. "Send down the air ship, Barney. We have seen all we care to, up here."

Down sank the air ship to the earth. It was not long before, passing through the clouds, the topography of the earth was seen.

It awakened a thrill in the breasts of all. They had no desire to remain longer aloft in the sky.

It seemed as if the most desirable thing in the world was to set foot on mother earth again. The air ship could not descend fast enough.

But soon it was within a mile of a great broad plain. Frank surveyed it carefully, and said:

"We are still over America. That is a Western prairie."

"Do you believe it?" asked Seefor.

"Believe it? I know it!" declared Frank. "There is no mistaking. And poor Morse fell down there to an instant death."

"That is just what he did!"

Down sank the air ship. The prairie now was quite plainly seen. There was a clump of timber just to the eastward, and a creek ran along its verge.

Nothing like a human habitation was to be seen.

It seemed as if this was indeed a howling wilderness. That it was probably deep down in Arizona or New Mexico, Frank felt sure.

He knew what the perils of the region might be.

Lurking Apaches were everywhere and they would be glad of an opportunity to board the air ship.

Watch was kept for the remains of poor Morse. But not a trace was seen of him as yet.

He allowed the air ship to descend to within a few hundred feet of the ground. Then he threw a rope ladder over the rail.

"Any who care to go down may do so!" said Frank.

Watts stepped forward. Seefor and Ventura joined him. Barney looked inquiringly at Frank.

The young inventor nodded.

"Yes, you may go," he said. "If you find the body give it good Christian burial."

"That we will!" declared Watts.

A few moments later they were descending the ladder. Soon they were upon the prairie floor.

Watts had fancied that he saw an indistinguishable black mass lying in a hollow in the prairie a few hundred yards away.

They approached this now with dread misgivings.

One sickening glance was enough. There was the body of the scientist crushed beyond identification.

It was tenderly deposited in a grave dug on the spot. A rude headstone was placed over the last resting place of the famous Professor Morse.

Then they started to return to the air ship. But before half the distance was covered a wild whoop was heard, and from the distant clump of trees a half hundred mounted Indians appeared.

They were between the scientists and the air ship. They came on, riding like demons.

"Heaven help us!" gasped Seefor. "They will ride us down!"

But Barney, who had figured in too many fights to be phased by this situation, raised his rifle, crying:

"Shure, gentlemen, give it to them. Foire fer the center and they'll niver reach us, be sure!"

Already Frank and Pomp had opened fire from the air ship. Then all the rifles were cracking.

It was, indeed, a hot time.

The Indians dropped in numbers from their ponies' backs. But still they kept on.

The next moment Barney and the three professors were ridden down. The Celt found himself in the clutches of several powerful savages.

Before he knew it he was a helpless prisoner.

As well try to pit himself against a Hercules. He was whipped over a pony's back and carried off bodily.

The three professors were not made prisoners. But Ventura was senseless and Seefor was wounded, while Watts had just recovered from a stupor of a blow on the head.

It was evident that the savages had left them for dead, and it was lucky indeed that they did not pause to scalp them, else they would have discovered their mistake.

Seefor was the first on his feet. But the Indians were gone.

They disappeared over the long rolls of the prairie, riding like mad. A mile distant was a high wooded butte to which they made their way.

Frank and Pomp had given the party up for dead, after seeing them ridden down by the savages. What was their surprise to see Seefor and Watts rise from the prairie grass. They lifted Ventura up, but he was yet unconscious.

"Joy!" cried Frank, wildly. "They are not killed. Ah, well, Pomp, this is a lucky moment for us."

"What am de fishmon, sah?" asked Pomp, dubiously.

Neither had seen the abduction of Barney, the Celt had been entrapped so quickly and adroitly.

"Heaven help him!" exclaimed Frank, with pallid face. "I cannot believe that he is dead, though, for he always escapes."

"Massy Lordy, he ain' nowhar to be seen!"

The air ship bore down to the spot and rested on the prairie. Ventura was carried over the rail.

Frank saw that his injury was not serious, then he asked:

"But where is Barney?"

The savages by this time had vanished in the direction of the butte. Nothing was seen of Barney.

But one conclusion could be formed, and this was that the Celt had been carried off by the savages. This was enough for Frank.

He quickly got things in readiness, and the air ship started in pursuit. It bore down rapidly toward the butte.

But the savages had vanished. Not one of them was in sight.

Whether they had gone beyond the butte or not, it was not easy to say. It was certain that they had disappeared.

The air ship hovered over the butte.

It was a curious high pillar of rock and earth, with a dense growth of scraggy trees upon its sides and its summit.

But, as the Saturn encircled it, a dark cavity was seen in its side. It was large enough to admit a horse and rider.

"A cave!" ejaculated Frank. "That is just what it is. They have entered it with Barney."

"Do you believe it?" asked the Portuguese astronomer.

"I can explain their disappearance in no other way."

"What can be done about it?"

Frank looked grim and determined.

"Barney must be rescued," he said, "at any cost."

The air ship ascended to the top of the butte. Here was sufficient surface for it to descend and rest safely enough.

From this vantage point a view of the plains could be had in all directions. The Indians could not well escape from their hiding place without being seen.

But how to ferret them out and rescue the Celt was the question. It was not an easy problem.

However, Frank set to work upon it with energy. He armed himself, and went out on the summit of the butte.

He inspected its sides, and saw that the butte was a sort of hollow

cone of sandstone. Ages before, probably during the glacial period, water had surged about it and fashioned out the interior.

But, so far as he could see, the cavity by which the savages had entered was the only entrance. To attempt to enter by this would be the most certain means of losing life.

CHAPTER XI.

THE UNDERGROUND PASSAGE.

For there was not the slightest doubt but that the savages were stationed inside the butte and that they would fire upon the invaders. In this quandary there could be no definite line of action formed.

The day waned and finally darkness settled down. The search-light played upon the cavern entrance, however, and a close watch was kept.

It was near midnight when a number of dark forms appeared outside the cavern entrance.

This proved that the butte was the hiding-place of the savages. Frank fired a shot at them and they retreated into the cavern.

"We will keep them there for a while," he muttered.

"What good will it do?" asked Seefor. "It will not help Barney!"

"They may decide to give him up rather than stay there and starve. At any rate we have no other way of getting at them."

"That is right!" cried Ventura. "When they know they are besieged they may weaken!"

"I hope so!" said Watts.

All that night the savages were kept penned in the butte cavity. If one showed his head a shot compelled him to draw it back.

When daylight came again the situation was unchanged. But now a new incident occurred.

Pomp, who was at the rail, gave a sharp exclamation:

"Suah, Marse Frank," he cried, "would yo' jes' take a look ober yender. It looks drefful like smoke."

Frank gave a violent start.

Rising up from a point of the butte there was certainly visible a thin wreath of smoke.

"Great Scott!" he ejaculated. "Is this a volcano?"

Instantly he sprang over the rail and approached the smoke. The astronomers followed him.

It came up through a thin crevice in the sandstone. Deep down in the heart of the butte somewhere there was fire.

This was certain.

Watts exclaimed:

"By the shades of Nero! The Indians have built a camp-fire down there, and this smoke comes from it."

"You are right," agreed Ventura.

Frank was at once interested.

To him it proved a startling and important fact. There was another method of communication with the interior of the butte than by the cavern.

At once he knelt down and examined the crevice.

He saw that it was a crack in the sandstone ledge, and that below there was a cavity. Whether this was the interior of the butte or not he could only guess.

But he believed that it was, and he conceived a startling plan of action.

"Pomp," he said, tersely, "bring me a hammer and chisel from the air ship. Be quick!"

"A'right, sah!"

The coon returned in a very few moments with the articles in question. It did not take long for Frank to cut away the edges of the crevice.

The sandstone was of that soft variety, which is easily cut with a saw or a knife.

It was not long, therefore, before the young inventor had made quite a cavity in the ledge. His companions now proceeded to give him assistance.

Great chunks of the sandstone were dislodged and removed, and steadily the aperture increased until it was large enough to admit the body of a man.

Then the shell burst through, and a winding orifice was seen which trended downward.

This looked as if it had at some ancient period been a water course, of which there was little doubt.

The smoke came winding up this with increasing volume. It served as a sort of chimney or outlet from the cavern below.

The scientists were much excited.

To them it was a means of entering the cavern, and possibly of collecting the rescue of Barney. Frank shared this assumption.

The orifice easily admitted a man's body, and Watts whispered:

"Who will venture to go down there?"

"I will, sah!" cried Pomp, eagerly.

"No; I think I had better go," interposed Frank.

The coon looked disappointed, and Seefor said:

"Really, Mr. Reule, I think it would be well for Pomp to go down first and see what it looks like; then we can decide as to what shall be done next."

"I wish yo' would, Marse Frank," pleaded Pomp.

"Well," agreed the young inventor, "remember that time is valuable, Pomp."

"A right, sah!"

The coon slid down into the orifice. He disappeared from view.

As it was of a flaring and circuitous course, Pomp had only to brace himself a little to go down all right.

He kept on downward for a distance of about ten feet.

Then the orifice ceased, and he found himself upon a shelf of rock in a dark chamber. Far below was a void, and down there in the darkness he saw a fire.

About it were gathered a number of forms. He leaned over the shelf and looked down with a curious fascination.

He saw the tattered savages reclining in various attitudes of ease, and their ponies were tethered to the walls. But what at once claimed Pomp's attention was a welcome sight.

Bound to a pillar of the sandstone was the white prisoner. He recognized Barney with ease.

"Golly!" muttered the coon. "I jes' wish Ah could get down dere. I would set him free mighty quick."

It was full forty feet down to the floor of the cavern, and there was no visible descent.

So the coon had to content himself with watching his friend so far below. Suddenly a temptation seized him.

If he could only attract Barney's attention he felt sure that it would give the Celt fresh courage. Certainly it would be reassuring for him to know that his friends were so near him.

He knew that it would be at the risk of also warning the savages. But he watched his opportunity and then dropped a pebble into the depths.

It struck full upon Barney's shoulder. Instinctively the Celt gazed upward.

And in that instant in the reflection of the firelight far above, he saw Pomp's black face.

An exclamation was upon the Celt's lips. But he restrained it just in time. He experienced a thrill of joy, however.

He would have liked to answer Pomp. But he was astute enough not to do this.

Then the coon disappeared.

In a few moments, breathless and excited, he was again in the open air. His report was listened to with interest.

"This is a great stroke in our favor," declared Frank. "I believe that we shall rescue Barney all right."

"Good!" cried Seefor. "I trust that such will be the case. What do you propose to do, Mr. Reade?"

"Wait for night again," said Frank. "Then when the red men are asleep one of us may descend on a rope and release Barney."

This looked feasible and yet it was not without its risk.

But it was the move decided upon, so it was awaited with interest. The day passed slowly.

A number of times the savages attempted to leave the cavern, but each time they failed. So the attempt was abandoned.

Darkness finally settled down.

Frank kept the search light fixed on the cavern entrance steadily. The hours passed until midnight came.

Then Pomp crawled down through the orifice with a long coil of rope. Frank soon followed him.

Crouching on the shelf of sandstone they could look down with ease into the depths of the cavern.

The savages were crouched about the fire apparently sound asleep. None of them seemed to be awake, though sentries, no doubt, were at the entrance.

But the coast seemed clear so far as the rescuers were concerned.

It did not take Frank long to decide what to do. Barney was awake and signaled his friends above.

Slowly the rope was lowered into the pit. Down it went until it lay at Barney's feet.

If the Celt had only had the use of his limbs, the rest would have been easy. But as it was, it was necessary to give him liberty.

Pomp swung over the verge of the shelf. The next moment he silently slid down the rope.

He reached the floor below like a silent shadow. A touch of the keen edge of a knife severed the thongs which bound Barney.

Then the Celt was free.

It did not take him long to take advantage of that fact. He went up the rope like a monkey.

He reached the verge of the shelf, and was assisted over it by Frank. Then Pomp followed him.

A moment later he was also on the shelf. None of the Indians had been aroused.

The rescue was a complete success.

It did not require many moments for them to gain the open air. The three astronomers had been waiting for them with interest.

They were delighted to find that Pomp was successful in effecting the rescue of Barney. All were quickly aboard the air ship.

"What a surprise it will be to those Indians," cried Watts, "when they wake up and find their prisoner gone."

"How will they explain it?" asked Ventura, curiously.

"That is not easy to guess," replied Frank. "At any rate, they must swallow it; but we must look out that it does not occur again."

"That is just the idea," agreed Ventura. "But I can hardly see how we could have foreseen the contingency which is thus so happily terminated."

"You could not," admitted Frank. "It was the unfortunate force of circumstances."

It was decided to leave the spot at once. The air ship was ready to sail.

So Barney went into the pilot-house and started the rotas.

Swiftly and silently the Saturn rose into the air and sped away southward. The Indians were not seen again.

But the end of the thrilling experiences of our navigators was not yet.

Before daybreak came, a dull, soughing wind came moaning from the southeast. Frank noted this not without a little concern.

"Oa my word," he muttered. "I believe we are going to have a bad storm."

"Bejabbers!" cried Barney, "it acts to me like one of the Western harrocanes, sor."

"It does to me!" agreed Frank. "We will do well to make preparations for it."

"Phwat shall we do, sor?"

"If the storm bids fair to break right away, send the air ship above it if you can."

"All right, sor!"

Daybreak was at hand. All along the horizon a light line was seen.

But in the southeast a dark funnel like cloud was rising above the zenith. Frank gave a look at it and said with alarm:

"There is danger in that cloud. We must prepare for a tornado."

"What can we do?" asked Seefor anxiously. The others showed trepidation.

Frank looked across the country. He saw high ranges of mountains to the east. If he could gain their cover he believed it would be the safest plan.

CHAPTER XII.

WHICH IS THE END.

THERE is no place a tornado can be met with such danger as on an open plain.

Among the mountains its fury is broken and its sweep retarded. There was no certainty of rising above it by flying upwards.

Frank knew this, and decided at once to strike for the mountains. It would be a question of outstripping the storm.

If the air ship could be lowered among the peaks it would ride the tornado out safely under their cover.

So he stepped into the pilot house and put on all speed. The Saturn was driven as never before.

And she literally flew through the morning air on her way to the hills. On and on she fled.

A party of campers were seen on the banks of a little creek. They were folding their tents and preparing for the tornado as the Saturn fled past.

It must have been a surprise to them to see the air ship speeding past at such a rate. But there was no time for curiosity.

The dull sullen boom of the tornado was heard breaking over the prairies far to the southward. Every instant that awful angry black cloud was shutting down.

It would certainly envelope the country ere long. Already great pattering drops of rain announced its close proximity.

And yet the mountains seemed far away. Frank turned the motor on to its fullest capacity.

A mighty clap of thunder shook the air. Then a whiff of wind ruffled the grasses of the plain.

"We are lost!" groaned Frank. "We shall not make it."

In that moment he expected the tornado to break. Already his hand was upon the lever in the *dernier ressort* of sending the air ship up into higher altitudes.

But the storm yet delayed. The next moment the air ship crossed a range of foothills, and shot into a deep canyon. Then a mighty mountain peak was between it and the storm.

Down it settled into a deep pocket in the hills. The storm never reached this spot save in the downpour of rain.

The mountain pines above tossed and surged, but the wind never penetrated the pocket. The air ship was safe.

It had been a close call, and all felt much elated with the result. For several hours the downpour of rain was terrific. Then the storm gradually passed over.

Once more the sun shone forth. All on board the air ship were glad to see it.

With the exciting experiences of the past few days Frank and Barney and Pomp were much exhausted.

This was a beautiful spot in the mountains and there seemed no enemy in proximity. Frank embraced the opportunity to rest.

"We will put in a few hours of sleep here," he declared. "Then we will start on our homeward way. I think we can safely say that our expedition has been a complete success!"

"Indeed it has," agreed the astronomers, unanimously. "and we owe it all to you, Mr. Reade."

"I am very glad to have been of service to you," replied Frank, modestly. "Such of you as wish might now embrace the opportunity to rest."

Watts and Seefor with Frank retired to the cabin. But Barney and Pomp and Ventura were not weary enough for this. They preferred to remain on deck.

In fact the scientist decided to accept the opportunity to go specimen hunting. There was a rich field for it in the canyons.

Barney expressed a desire to accompany the scientist, so Pomp was left on guard, and armed, the two explorers set out.

The professor carried a geologist's hammer and some acids for testing minerals. Thus equipped, he was ready to locate any possible vein of gold or other precious metal.

Striking into one of the canyons, they wandered on for some while. The scientist picked up some very beautiful specimens of crystal and garnet and finally found a gold flouter.

"This indicates," he said, "that there is somewhere about here a rich deposit of this precious metal. If we are sharp we may find it."

"Be me sowl, I hope we will," cried Barney. "Share it's a surprise we'll give them all when we go back."

With this they set ardently to work. The scientist very speedily traced the vein.

There is no pursuit more fascinating than gold hunting. Our adventurers soon became enwrapped in it.

In fact, so engrossed were they that they forgot all else.

Up the canyon they went and did not notice a rude cabin far up in a cleft of the rocks until they were almost upon it.

The professor was the first to see it and he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"Jupitor!" he exclaimed. "This cabin belongs to another party."

"Phwat's that, sor?" exclaimed Barney in surprise. "Phwat do yez say?"

The professor pointed to the cabin. The Celt stared in surprise.

"Shure, sor, is there any man living there?" he asked.

"We'll find out!" declared the scientist. Then he shouted:

"Hello, the cabin."

No answer came back.

Beside the structure was a rude slice-box and the remains of a gold washing machine. But no living person was to be seen.

Professor Ventura's curiosity was now aroused, and he was determined to satisfy it.

He advanced to the cabin door, and tapped upon it.

No answer came.

It seemed to be deserted.

The scientist tried to look in at one of the windows. Then he went back and pushed on the door.

It yielded and swung back on rusty hinges. He stepped into the cabin and beheld a gruesome sight.

A rude table was overturned upon the earth floor. A rude bench was near the improvised fire-place.

A number of moth eaten bear-skins were hanging upon the walls. Picks and shovels and cooking utensils were scattered about.

But all those things were no more than one might expect to find in such a place.

Upon the earth floor, however, lay that which gave the discoverers a chill.

Three human skeletons, the remains of men, with vestiges of their miners' clothes yet remaining.

Beside them were rusted revolvers. They clutched these in their skeleton fingers, and this told the story of their fate.

They had died defending their gold. No doubt some band of outlaws had swooped down upon them, and this was the result.

It was a sad spectacle.

The two explorers gazed upon it with strange sensations. It is needless to say that their sympathies were with the victims of the outrage.

"It is a dreadful thing!" declared Professor Ventura. "The deed was that of fiends! I hope their murderers were overtaken by vengeance."

"Begorra, they ought to have been hung up, ivory wan av thim!" declared Barney.

"That is true. Honest miners, they were doubtless hoping to return to dear ones with a fortune, and this is the result."

A brief examination of the hut was made. But everything of value had been taken away.

Nothing could be done save to leave the dead in the hut where they were. It was a fitting tomb.

There was no record to show who they were or where they came from. So the two explorers went out and closed the door.

They did not feel easy until they were once more in the depths of the canyon. Then Barney said:

"Shure, sor, I'm afther thlukin' we moight as well go back to the air ship. They may be expicting us, sor!"

"All right, Barney," agreed the scientist. "I am quite ready!"

So they retraced their steps to the Saturra at once.

When they arrived there they found the others aroused and ready to resume the journey. They were much refreshed and listened with interest to the story told by Ventura and Barney.

"There are many such cases," said Frank. "It is sad indeed, but the wretches who perpetrato such crimes will never hang until some other mode of trapping them is devised. These hills afford too many hiding-places."

"That they do," agreed Watts. "All this country should be policed by United States marshals."

The air ship was soon aloft again. An eastward course was set, and leaving the mountains, in a few hours a frontier town was seen.

Then other dwellings came rapidly into view. They were approaching civilization at a rapid rate.

Soon a government military post was seen, and before nightfall they crossed a broad river and came upon a great farming country.

All that night the air ship sailed eastward. The next morning boundless plains were seen.

And at noon the waters of a great river burst into view. Upon its banks was a city.

"That is the Missouri," declared Frank, "and that city is Omaha. Across the river is Council Bluffs."

Then every hour some new town or city burst into view. The wonderfully fertile prairies of Iowa spread beneath them.

The Mississippi river came next. Then they passed over the historic battlefields of the Black Hawk war, and beyond the Rock river entered upon the plains of Illinois.

Thus the voyage in mid-air went on. The air ship caused much excitement as it passed over the towns.

People rushed out in large numbers, and their cheering could be plainly heard. Frank might have been sure of an ovation had he descended anywhere.

But he did not care to do this. They were homeward bound, and his one idea was to get there as soon as possible.

So on sped the air ship by day and night.

One morning Frank came up from the engine-room with a grave face. Noting this, Seefor asked him the reason therefor.

"This will be the last trip of the Saturra," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"If she holds together until we get home, I shall be satisfied."

"I don't understand you!"

"It is just this," said Frank. "She has gone just as far as she can. Her machinery is quite worn out, and she will never be worth repairing."

The scientist was surprised.

"That is too bad," he said. "What recompense can we make?"

"I ask none," replied Frank, cheerfully. "The aerial voyage has been recompense enough."

"We feel that we owe you a great debt."

"Not at all!" replied the young inventor. "I shall break the Saturn up for old iron when we get back to Readestown. But I have already a new idea for an air ship."

"You have?"

"Yes!"

"I trust I shall be allowed to see it, and if possible to take a trip in it."

"That will be likely."

One fine morning the Saturn hung over Readestown. Slowly she settled down into the yard of the great machine works.

A great crowd of people gathered to welcome the voyagers home.

The telegraph carried the news of their return all over the country, and they were congratulated upon their success. The astronomers were the heroes of the hour among the scientific circles.

Thus the expedition into space terminated satisfactorily for all. Frank Reade, Jr., Barney and Pomp were glad to get home.

The astronomers went straight to their homes, and later reported at their scientific clubs. A vote of thanks was tendered Frank Reade, Jr.

And thus ended the trip to witness the extinction of the Sinking Star, Vlnno, and its attendant phenomena, until Frank Reade, Jr., essays another wonderful feat, therefore, let us bid the reader a fond adieu.



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